

FLUFF

A Story by Elaine Sterne

BEHIND the gray smoke, that hangs over Pittsburgh like a veil of gauze, lies a city of beauty—misty hills, pink as a rose at dawn, long avenues of spreading trees, great palaces of white marble, perched high above the soot and grime of the Black Valley—the river's edge, where fires spit their endless flames skyward and giant hammers crash.

There are flower gardens and green lawns and little clusters of silver pines against red brick walls. There are blue lagoons and woody parks and fountains that toss a million diamonds into the air—homes of the operators, the capitalists—and the greatest of these capitalists was James Dean.

Dean began as a breaker boy; entered the mines at eight, when he took his seat beside a dozen other grimy youngsters who picked the slate from the coal.

One day he emerged into the yellow sunlight, blinking, stooped-shouldered, prematurely old, but chief stockholder in Prendergast, the largest anthracite mine in the state, all because he promised to do for boys what he had not done for himself, nor to laborer, nor to miner's helper, nor to full-stuffed miner, nor to foreman, nor superintendent.

HE was frankly greedy for the good things of life. They came to him at high cost. A successful superintendent, won his promotion through producing coal cheaply—that meant by insisting upon more work than the men under him were physically able to do. So Dean became a slave driver, with but two interests dominating his whole existence—the mines and the son his wife had died in giving him.

Dean named the boy Peter and handed him over to the care of others; nurses, tutors and eventually college professors. He made no attempt to become acquainted with his son during his youth. Dean was too busy, moreover, he scarcely knew how to talk to his child. He was content to wait. Some day Peter would come to him a man. Then they would be inseparable, working out business problems, laying gigantic schemes, developing great projects together—always together.

And so, one day in June, Peter came home with his college degree and his twenty-one years, feeling a keen eagerness to become acquainted at last with the great man whose name he bore. They were to dine together, and to Peter this first meal was a matter of greatest importance. He dressed carefully for it. It was a custom of his fraternity house to slip into evening clothes each night. He spent more time than usual before his mirror.

Dean had been out to the mines that day. He wore corduroy trousers and an old coat. His shoes were covered with mud, his face flamed with a bluish sort. His finger nails were dirty.

He glanced away from the paper he was pretending to read when his son entered.

"What are you all dressed up for?" he shot at him.

Peter suddenly remembered. That was the way his father did; shot questions at him. He explained, flitting swiftly. His father cut him short.

"Well, you can eat the soup and fish after this. You ain't a college dude now, remember, you're a business man."

Peter inclined his head. Perfectly willing to do it, he said. So they went in to dinner.

"Tomorrow," Dean told him, "O'Hara will show you over the mines, then you can go down and spend a few months with a pick and shovel. It will do you hands."

"A lot of good."

"You'll sit in heavy silence. After a similar lack of conversation in the library, Peter rose, then said, "I'm going up. Good-night, father."

"Night," growled Dean, "don't forget to put out the light in the upper hall."

Jailers in the Orient.

It appears from a story told by an American who has spent much of his time in the far east that the wardens in Burmese jails are nearly always men from the Punjab and northern India. They are large and muscular, but the principal reason for their selection is that they are not Buddhists. The Burman is sometimes employed as a warder, but his Buddhist education often causes his prejudices to come in collision with his official duties, as in the case of the warder in this story.

A phoengee, or Buddhist priest, in jail for stealing, had been placed in solitary confinement for disobeying the prison rules. His influence as a priest had persuaded a Burman warder to procure him some hotel rube, which, being discovered in his possession, caused his punishment.

The stone cell in which the priest was confined had a plank supported at both ends by insertion into slots in the walls. The plank served as a bed, and at night the priest jumped on it again and again, in order to force the ends out of the shallow sockets.

The Burman sentry peeped into the aperture of the door and asked him to desist. The convict replied that he was a priest, and as such was forbidden to sleep on a raised bed.

By this time he had got the board free, and to disarm the sentry's suspicions lay down upon it and feigned sleep. The sentry returned to his post, but a few hours later he was alarmed to see the phoengee walking softly down the passage. He had used the board as a lever to force out two of the bars in the door and had managed to squeeze himself through the aperture.

The sentry, a Buddhist, was embarrassed. To lay violent hands upon the holy convict was out of the question; to allow him to escape would bring punishment upon himself. As the passage doors were locked, and the priest safe for the present, the sentry ventured to remonstrate with his charge on the impropriety of his behavior.

The tramp of the relief jailer was heard outside. The sentry knelt and implored the priest to return to his cell. The door opened upon the tableau—a uniformed sentry in an attitude of supplication before a convict.

The Punjabese who formed the relief guard, not being Buddhists, had no respect for phoengees. The convict was promptly bundled into a new cell.

NEXT morning Peter paid his first visit to the mines. Standing at the foot of the shaft, with the chill air sweeping about him, he conceived an unutterable loathing for them. He wanted to get out. He wanted sunlight, trees, flowers—not shadows with little pale lights appearing and disappearing into silence.

He heard O'Hara calling: "This way."

After a while they reached a dark gangway and scrambled up the side, entering a narrow passage. O'Hara pushed aside a little canvas curtain, thick with moisture and coal dust, and they entered a sort of chimney on the side of which stretched rungs of a giant ladder.

At the top of the ladder was a small black room. A miner worked there, but scarcely noticed them. O'Hara shouted something to him above the shriek of the air drill that was boring its way into the coal, and the miner answered. But Peter could not understand. It was all unreal to him—the darkness, the intent figures, the flickering lights, the infernal noise.

"Well, you've seen enough for one day," O'Hara said finally close to his ear and began the descent.

His father awaited him in his office. It was a handsome room, high above the street, with a sweeping view of the low hills and beyond a gray ribbon of water.

Dean, tapping his desk with a pencil end, studied his son.

"Well," he said at length, "what do you think of the mines?"

Peter looked at his father, then out the window. He heard his father's voice.

"What's the matter with you? Are you deaf? I asked you how you like the mines."

"Oh, all right," Peter answered. Instantly he saw it was not enough. He plunged on. "I wish they weren't so dirty, though, and so dark."

Dean stared at his son; then he laughed. "Dirty and dark—did you think we were running a laundry?"

An office boy entered noiselessly and handed Dean a slip. The effect was electrical.

"Clear out," he said to his son. "Farrell is here to see me."

He did not explain who Farwell was, but Peter sensed his enormous importance and rose. He descended to the street. It was pulsing with life.

NEXT morning Peter went on to his mining corps. With them he spent two highly unsuccessful months in the heart of the mines.

Peter knew nothing whatever about taking sights or measuring. He cared less. He waited sloshing through old abandoned entries full of water or impregnated with the deadly fire-damp.

He made mistakes. He was late to work. He hated the place and his father and the men.

One day he was abruptly transferred to the timbering gang—as hard-boiled a crowd of men as you could find.

Peter was a very bad timberman—one of the worst, it may be said, in Prendergast's history. Very soon Dean learned of this. His son's failure cut him deeply. That, perhaps, was what drove him to take the step he did.

Peter had had a hard day of it. The foreman, angry on his father's behalf, sent him to distant parts of the mine on difficult jobs, all of which involved long, back-breaking walks in the chill darkness, loaded down heavily with his timberman's tools.

Then O'Hara, passing by, delivered a message.

"Your old man says there's a company for dinner and you're to be on hand."

Peter went home when his shift was over and dressed. In the dining room he found a big square-shouldered man and his square-shouldered daughter, a woman had been in the mine on difficult jobs, all of which involved long, back-breaking walks in the chill darkness, loaded down heavily with his timberman's tools.

She had red cheeks—round, firm, shiny ones—and kind, bovine eyes. Her nose he didn't like. It was too flat and too pink. Her mouth was wide and placid. She had a pyramid of carefully waved chestnut hair. She was introduced as Miss Margaret Farwell.

Instantly Peter remembered the name as he bowed to her and to her father. Farwell was the very important person whose entrance had swept Peter aside that first day. Farwell.

"Yes, that was it."

Farwell spoke to Peter. "Want to come over to New York with us for the week end? Hear you've been working hard."

"Why, yes," said Peter; "that is—"

He looked at his father. "That is—"

"I'll let you off," Dean nodded. "Think the mines can run a day without you. Fact is, I'm going too."

"Oh, but I want to go with you for the week end. Hear you've been working hard."

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HE FELT HER BENDING OVER HIM.

never spoke Peter's name. It was as though he had never been.

THE instant Bobby was married she wanted to go to Pittsburgh. She had seen in the Sunday magazine sections pictures of the Dean home. She was already planning a wardrobe suitable to the new mistress of it.

Bobby, turning away from the marriage clerk, had said:

"What train do we take, dear?"

Peter shook his head.

"We won't go back—tonight," he gulped. He had twenty dollars in his pocket. He wondered if Chick would lend him his studio for a few days.

"Well, tomorrow, then. But let's wire your father right away."

"No," said Peter. "We won't do that."

"It was then that Bobby, clutching her bouquet—five precious dollars worth, faced him suspiciously.

"Why won't we?" she demanded. "I'm going to."

"It's no use," said Peter. "He's through with me."

"I don't understand," she said, "suppose you explain."

"It was my father's fault," Peter heard himself saying. "I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to hurt him as he hurt me. I knew that this would be the worst—"

"Marrying you, you mean?" asked Bobby simply.

"Marrying any one but the woman he chose for me."

"Oh, he chose some one, did he?"

"Yes—yes—I wish—I wish—Gad, what can I say?"

"And all you told me about his wanting you to marry—that wasn't true?"

Peter whispered, "I don't know what to do—I don't know what to do."

Bobby spoke slowly. "So he'll cut you off for doing this. Is that it, Peter? Suppose you tell me all."

"Yes, he'll cut me off."

Suddenly Bobby flung back her head. "All right, Peter. Now then, let's see about it. How much money have you got?"

"Twenty dollars," said Peter.

Bobby said, "Well, I haven't given up my job in the chorus and that'll help, of course, but you've got to find work, too. Between us we may be able to keep a roof over our heads and—"

me an hour—a second, after what I've done. It wouldn't be fair to you.

Bobby drew close to him. "I said I liked you, Peter," she told him. "I may end by loving you. It's up to you."

And she kissed him again. This time he caught her to him for a second. "I'll make you," he whispered. "I'll make you."

TRUE to his word, Chick got him a job in the bank. It was as runner, which netted some ninety dollars a month and entailed long hours of work. He was there at 8 in the morning and he left at 7:30 at night. It was the only job open to a man of no experience, but great willingness. Peter snapped it up. He turned over his pay envelope twice a month to Bobby and she gave him enough for lunches and dinners. The rest went toward the black hole of a room they occupied in a boarding house within walking distance of the bank.

Money assumed huge and unprecedented proportions to Peter. He came to wonder if he had been right in condemning his father's worship of it. After all, one had to have it to live—if you called what they were doing living. He thought sometimes of the big white house—of his room and bath—of a dinner perfectly served.

And then Bobby broke her ankle and the show went on the road.

She never complained, her little white teeth caught in her lip, as the doctor twisted and turned her injured foot. But once it was in its plaster cast and a long siege of inactivity stretching before her, she spoke to Peter:

"My two hundred a month is gone for a good long time. All we have is what you can make. I guess you'll have to find an odd job to do at nights, Peter. I'm awfully sorry, but I'll help all I can."

He found an opening at nights as cashier in a drug store. That brought in twenty dollars a week more. It meant working until 12, after a day on his feet. But he was glad to be able to do it for her. She was such a good soldier.

Clutching his pay envelope in his hot hand at a week's end, he knew for the first time the black fear lest on opening it he find inside a blue slip. What if he lost his position?

The weeks turned into months, and Bobby was able to walk around with the help of a cane.

One day on arriving at the bank, Peter found word awaiting him that the cashier wished to see him. In a flash, he reviewed the previous day's trips to different banks, where he had presented notes for payment. So far as he knew he had made no mistakes. Not one. He approached the cashier smiling, but his face was very white.

"Well," he said, "what's wrong?"

The cashier grinned at him. "Nothing much, except that you seem to be able to deliver the goods and we're going to give you a tryout as assistant bookkeeper, which means you get here in the morning at 8:30 after this and draw down twenty-five dollars more a month to start with."

Peter caught his breath. "You mean—you mean—I've made good?"

"Sure you have," said the cashier. "If you do as well on the books you may be president of the place some of these days. There's no telling, my boy."

Peter could not wait to get home and tell Bobby. It seemed as though the day and night would never come to an end. At last he was free!

He brought her a bunch of red carnations and a box of candy. He hoped she would be awake when he came home. She was seated in a chair, awaiting him. He dropped the flowers into her lap.

"It's all right, hon, I can afford them. Got a raise. What do you think of that, Mrs. Dean, for a piece of news?"

He did not wait for her reply. "I'll never leave the old bank. I'll just work my way up to the top. I'll read books on banking and interview fellows and—"

She had caught the flowers to her and laid her cheek against them.

"I don't think you will, Peter. I don't think you will."

It was then that he noticed for the first time her flushed cheeks and bright eyes.

"A wire came for you today from a man named O'Hara."

"From O'Hara? . . . Father isn't he?"

"No," she said, "he isn't dead, but he's very ill and—and they think you had better come."

Peter stared before him.

"Of course, I'll go," he said, "and so will you."

"Yes," said Bobby. "I'll go too."

Suddenly she clasped her hands and leaned toward him.

OH, Peter, Peter, if you can only make him see how fine you are—how hard you've worked—and how much you can do, I'll be willing to have him hate me for marring you. Oh, yes, he'll hate me. I know what he thinks of people like me. He doesn't matter in the least, Peter, just fluff—oh, but what he thinks of me doesn't matter in the least, Peter, just so I can make him think the world of you!"

Dean lay in the room that had been his for twenty years. He lay with his eyes open staring before him. He had believed, chosen a bad time to see, but he knew it was a girl. You got nowhere thinking along that line. Nowhere at all.

He was all at once very tired and a little sorry for himself. He wished his wife had lived, or that he had had a daughter. Some one had entered the room. He could not turn his head to see, but he knew it was a girl. One of the servants probably. He half closed his eyes and watched through his lashes, pretending sleep. She crossed his line of vision. She limped slightly and was very small. And as she approached he saw that she was young and extremely pretty, though rather too thin and white he thought. Who was she? Who was she?

It was not until she leaned over him that he remembered. He opened his eyes with such suddenness that she started.